

The Mouse and the Shrike

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The Mouse and the Shrike

by [AnywherePlace \(BrownShrike\)](#)

Summary

Lan Jingyi has a massive crush on Nie Huaisang, but since he is a very pure young man, he doesn't really know how to deal with his own feelings. Thankfully (if you are Nie Huaisang), or perhaps not thankfully (if you are a regular decent person), Nie Huaisang is smart, and also kind of terrible, so he knows how to navigate this situation and use it to his own questionable benefit.

Notes

I'm tagging this as *underage* just to be safe, but don't expect anything raunchy. Also, don't chide me for Lan Jingyi's glaringly improper behavior and other things like that (as well as some liberal interpretations of canon events): I'm just fooling around with my silly kinks and headcanons. You're emphatically not supposed to take this seriously. I swear to god I made a special pseud just to store my dumb shit in a separate place. Come on. Take a walk. Read something by Faulkner. Treasure your life.

The Mouse: Lan Jingyi's Side

Deep down, Lan Jingyi thinks that sect leader Nie is actually kind of cute.

Unlike Zewu-jun and Hanguang-jun, who carry themselves like graceful white swans, Nie Huaisang mostly resembles a nervous, fussy chipmunk; it doesn't help that he has large black eyes and a round face that makes him look like, well, a chipmunk preparing for a particularly harsh winter somewhere in the northern provinces. Maybe he was one in a previous incarnation; maybe he is still adjusting to his new life as a human being with massive responsibilities. This is definitely beyond Lan Jingyi's knowledge.

And honestly, it's not like Nie Huaisang doesn't have any genuinely good traits. He has a nice voice and a sweet laugh; he is always tastefully dressed, unlike the entire Jin family; if rumors are to be believed, he is a surprisingly decent painter – not on Zewu-jun's level, perhaps, but reasonably good; moreover, he often says things that sound outrageously, almost offensively dumb, but later, they end up... making sense, somehow or other. Besides, he *is* the head of the great Nie clan. He may be vastly less accomplished than his legendary older brother Nie Mingjue – whom Lan Jingyi doesn't really remember anyway, even though he was probably cool – but he is a sect leader, he *has* to be good at *something*.

"Yeah, right," Jin Rulan sneers at Lan Jingyi's words whenever his friend brings this up. "He would be *nothing* without Lianfang-zun and Zewu-jun. He only knows how to whine and get drunk and stare at birds."

"Don't say that," Lan Sizhui rebukes him gently. "We mustn't gossip."

"This isn't *gossip*," Jin Rulan insists. "I'm just telling the truth."

"Yeah, well, *I* can tell a couple of truths about *you*, young lady," Lan Jingyi snorts. "Like that one time when you found a toad in your bed."

Jin Rulan's face turns crimson. "*You* were the one who put it there!"

"Please *stop*," Lan Sizhui says very calmly, and they comply.

So, about Nie Huaisang. He is not strictly famous for his beauty like the esteemed Lan brothers, and he doesn't appear to be sought after by potential brides – but then again, to be fair, the same is true for Jin Rulan's stern maternal uncle, Jiang Wanyin. So true, in fact, that he has been blacklisted by every single matchmaker in China, and even kids like Lan Jingyi know that. To quote Jin Rulan himself, this isn't *gossip*.

But Lan Jingyi doesn't care about Jiang Wanyin's marriage prospects, or lack thereof. What does matter to him is Nie Huaisang's small figure, his long fluttering lashes, and the melancholic curve of his lips. On certain long summer nights, Lan Jingyi catches himself wondering idly whether Nie Huaisang has ever kissed anyone, male or female, because Lan Jingyi doesn't believe that gender is *that* big of a deal, despite what cranky old people might say about this. Nie Huaisang is an adult, so of *course* he has, logically speaking, and in any

case this is a silly – and extremely inappropriate – thing to ponder about, given that they are barely acquainted, but Lan Jingyi is simply curious, and *obviously* he doesn't mention this to anyone, not even Lan Sizhui.

Oh, and one more thing about adulthood. Nie Huaisang is technically a little taller than Lan Jingyi, though it's hard to be sure with his elaborate hairstyle and the decorations he likes to wear, but he is in his thirties, so either way he has already stopped growing, while Lan Jingyi himself shows no signs of stopping, and in a couple of years, he will most likely be tall enough to put his arm protectively around Nie Huaisang's shoulders, should Nie Huaisang ever need Lan Jingyi's protection. He isn't seriously planning to do that – why would he...? – but it's a fascinating mental image.

Because of this, and possibly a number of other reasons, Lan Jingyi practically rushes to Nie Huaisang's side when he spots him in the bustling, angry, chaotic crowd near the Guanyin temple. The older man looks tremendously tired and pale, even a little sick, and there is blood on his expensive grayish-green clothes. Lan Jingyi's heart clenches at this sight: Nie Huaisang isn't a warrior, so why on earth...?

"Sect leader Nie," he blurts out desperately. "Sect leader Nie, are you alright? Your leg... I mean... Oh, I'm Lan Jingyi from the Lan clan. Hello."

"Ah, of course, young master Lan," Nie Huaisang nods with a charming smile. "And I'm fine, please don't worry about me."

He takes another uncertain step and almost falls because his leg clearly hurts a lot, but Lan Jingyi manages to catch him by grabbing him rather unceremoniously around his waist, and *oh*, the leader of the Nie clan feels so *soft* in his arms, it's seriously kind of amazing, and Lan Jingyi's thought process pretty much halts.

"Thank you," Nie Huaisang sighs apologetically and gives Lan Jingyi a furtive, mildly curious look. "I simply... can't handle pain too well."

Lan Jingyi's chest swells with pride. "I can escort you if you wish."

"Escort me *where*?" Nie Huaisang giggles adorably, and Lan Jingyi blushes, because they are not exactly two streets away from the Nie residence right now, and while he would gladly carry sect leader Nie straight to Qinghe, he is not in the position to suggest that, since regardless of his reputation, Nie Huaisang has actual subordinates, so...

"I'm sorry, young master Lan, I'm not laughing at *you*," Nie Huaisang finally adds. "I think I'm just being hysterical because of... everything."

"Yeah," Lan Jingyi agrees. He doesn't know *everything* about everything, not yet, but as far as he can tell, the Guanyin temple incident was a grandiose disaster, so he can't exactly blame Nie Huaisang for feeling lost, especially since his brother – his *dead* older brother – was apparently involved in some indescribably macabre way. Nie Huaisang glances at him again, and Lan Jingyi realizes that he is still hugging his waist like it's the very last thing he is going to hold in this life. "Um. I'm, uh."

"You're awfully kind," Nie Huaisang reassures him, seemingly not in a hurry to release himself from Lan Jingyi's awkward embrace. "I've always held the Lan sect in high regard, and it's nice to see such a proper man among its younger disciples."

There is literally nothing proper about Lan Jingyi's thoughts at this moment.

"But I think you should pay more attention to Zewu-jun instead," Nie Huaisang continues in a sincerely concerned tone, somehow still not urging Lan Jingyi to let him go. "My leg will heal in no time, but Zewu-jun..." He shakes his head tragically. "He's not the type to ask for help, but trust me, he needs it more than ever."

"Okay," Lan Jingyi agrees and carefully distances himself from Nie Huaisang, making sure he is able to stand without his support. He does have a point about Zewu-jun: Nie Huaisang may be exhausted and hurt, but Lan Xichen was almost like a lifeless stone statue when Lan Jingyi and the rest of the boys arrived at the Guanyin temple. "Um, sect leader Nie? May I pay you a visit later when you get a bit better? If... our teachers let me?"

"A visit?" Nie Huaisang blinks and gasps in delight. "That would be... My residence must be terribly boring for a lively person such as young master Lan, I'm afraid, but I would be positively *thrilled* to have a nice long chat with you."

I don't know, Lan Jingyi is tempted to say, you're quite interesting yourself.

They part ways at the gate when Nie Huaisang's bodyguards arrive – some bodyguards, Lan Jingyi thinks in silent frustration, what if your master ends up with a limp for the rest of his life, *what then* – and Lan Jingyi goes back to his friends, frightened by his own boldness. He does have a knack for breaking rules, though perhaps not for getting away with it, but it seems that today, he has finally committed a social crime of truly epic proportions by acting like a rude, annoying, intrusive idiot around a high-ranking adult – an adult who's generally thought to be a idiot himself, but *even so*.

This makes Lan Jingyi pause for a second or two. So *why* do people say that Nie Huaisang is stupid, again?

If nothing else, he will have to figure this out, and soon.

Interlude: An Abbatoir of Shrikes

Chapter Notes

Felt like adding a little interlude about Nie Huaisang's relationship with his fiercely loyal ~~fanboys~~ soldiers.

Contrary to popular belief, Nie Huaisang is not despised by his own clan.

This is not merely a side effect of their loyalty to the late Nie Mingjue: the Nie soldiers worship the ground Nie Huaisang walks on *because* he is Nie Huaisang, not in spite of it. Those in the higher echelons of the sect are more or less aware of the fact that he is a military genius on par with Cao Cao himself; the younger disciples are not supposed to know too much, not *yet*, but Nie Huaisang's gentle charm and cute looks keep them fiercely motivated.

Nie Junxiang, a promising officer just out of his teens, is something of a celebrity in his circles, because he was the one who carried Nie Huaisang home when the latter sprained his ankle during the inspection of the stone castles. It wasn't even a serious injury, certainly not by the Nie clan's time-honored standards that included occasional limb loss, but Nie Huaisang let out a soft whimper and looked straight into Nie Junxiang's eyes, and Nie Junxiang realized, with staggering clarity, that he would gladly murder anyone and then stab himself in the chest for the sake of this person. Then, he lifted Nie Huaisang from the ground with the utmost care and reverence.

"I must be really heavy," Nie Huaisang sighed and rested his head on Nie Junxiang's shoulder. "Sorry."

Nie Huaisang was admittedly somewhat chubby, but to a well-trained Nie officer, this was barely different from carrying a slightly overweight cat, and in any case, Nie Junxiang was firmly convinced that his sect leader was *perfect* that way, so *soft* under his layered clothes.

"No, master," he whispered. "Y-you're fine. Um... does it hurt?"

Nie Huaisang winced a little. "I hope it's not broken," he replied, and tears welled up in his dark eyes. "Oh dear, I'm *so* sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to carry me all the way home," he added in a rueful voice and wrapped his arms around the young soldier's neck. "Please be my bodyguard for now."

Nie Junxiang's mind all but stopped functioning from sheer bliss.

"...Do you think he's going to be alright?" Nie Chenzhen says and stares at the dark rain clouds passing over the city gate. "Did you *see* how Su Minshan grabbed him? Like a sack of *flour*. I'll hack him into pieces if he does *anything* to master Nie."

Nie Junxiang shakes his head. "I *get* it, brother Chenzhen, but master Nie told us to trust him and wait until morning. He must do it alone because... he must."

Nie Chenzhen groans and throws his hands into the air. "Yeah, right! You know what he also told us? 'Please don't worry too much if I get injured!' He's fully prepared to be hurt, and he's so *small* and *frail*, and I swear I'll... Remember how he fainted at Jin Guangyao's palace, and we weren't even allowed to catch him? And he ended up with huge bruises on his back."

"I'm sure master Nie has a plan," Nie Junxiang consoles him. He doesn't sound too convincing. "I mean, I'd feel better about this if we just wiped the Jin clan out, but... we can't go against his orders."

"Fine," Nie Chenzhen concedes. "But this time, I'll be the one to carry him."

Nie Junxiang frowns. "Why are you bringing this up? We're not playing games here, and either way it's up to master Nie to decide."

"I *know*," Nie Chenzhen insists. "But I'll carry him."

Dawn breaks gorgeously over the streets, chasing the drizzle away, and the two young men start walking towards the Guanyin temple, their hearts thumping heavily in their chests.

"...wait, brother Chenzhen, you mean you actually *saw* his back?"

When they finally see Nie Huaisang's miniature figure supported by some harmless-looking boy from the Lan sect, their minds go blank with joy and relief. Nie Junxiang will live to one hundred and four, and his life will be eventful in the best of ways, but even on his deathbed, as an ancient white-haired man surrounded by his weeping, grateful grandchildren, he will remember this moment as the absolute peak of his earthly existence.

The Shrike: Nie Huaisang's Side

Chapter Notes

Random note, but I like to think that Nie Huaisang is a little plump. Not all cultivators need to be fit (~~for one, that would be boring~~), and Nie Huaisang in particular strikes me as someone who could be somewhat chubby and also CUTE AS ALL FUCK 'cause beauty comes in all shapes and surely Lan Jingyi is sophisticated enough to appreciate that. No, actually, Lan Jingyi is probably not sophisticated in the slightest, but *still*. LET ME ENJOY MY HEADCANONS IN PEACE. ♥ Anyway, here's another part of this (gloriously unrealistic) disaster of a romance.

Nie Huaisang is quite aware of the fact that Lan Jingyi is in love with him.

It's not exactly an intellectual achievement: Lan Jingyi's feelings are written all over his face. He is sixteen, and transparent like a drop of rain. Honestly, it's a shame that he's so young: Heaven knows Nie Huaisang has the moral compass of a lizard, but there are some lines he doesn't cross. Besides, this boy is a Lan kid, and Nie Huaisang doesn't want to infuriate the Lan sect by messing with their disciple; it's bad enough that he almost got him killed once, him and a bunch of other youngsters – not that anyone will ever learn of it, *but*.

Still, there's no harm in enjoying Lan Jingyi's adoration as long as they keep things innocent, and so, Nie Huaisang welcomes him joyfully when he finally arrives at the Nie residence as per his promise, looking serious, solemn and mildly terrified, which is deeply funny in itself, seeing how he is supposedly the troublemaker of the Lan clan.

"Young master Lan!" Nie Huaisang exclaims without a trace of insincerity. "Oh, I'm *so* glad to see you again."

Lan Jingyi bows, then raises his head again. "H-how have you been, sect leader Nie? I mean your leg and... stuff."

Stuff. This is going to be utterly delightful.

"I'm *fine*," Nie Huaisang smiles. "I came down with a fever when we returned to Qinghe, and, well, that was terrible, but..."

He is not making this up: he did in fact catch a cold while pretending to be unconscious at the Guanyin temple, and while it wasn't *that* awful, he ended up with a stuffy, runny nose and a scratchy throat. Thankfully, his subordinates were more than willing to coddle him, to the point where they treated it as a gigantic privilege.

"I'm all better now," Nie Huaisang insists. "And my leg doesn't hurt at all."

Lan Jingyi nods stoically. "That's good."

Their conversation over tea flows easily because Nie Huaisang knows how to ask the right questions – that's how he orchestrated Jin Guangyao's downfall after all, though in this case he's simply being kind to Lan Jingyi. They talk about Lan Xichen's recent seclusion, among other things, and Nie Huaisang sighs sympathetically as Lan Jingyi goes on and on about Zewu-jun. It's not like he *wants* Lan Xichen to wallow in misery till the end of time: he does resent his naivety, but to be entirely fair, Nie Huaisang himself used to trust Jin Guangyao in the past. Some months of rumination should be enough, he thinks.

Later, they go to Nie Huaisang's garden, and Lan Jingyi nearly gasps when he sees the lush, brilliant greens of the trees, and hears the beckoning, flute-like song of the oriole who then peeks out from behind a branch to exchange glances with Nie Huaisang, and the man greets it with a playful whistle.

"It's probably nothing compared to the Cloud Recesses, but I love this little place," Nie Huaisang laughs modestly as he sits down on a wide stone bench and invites Lan Jingyi to join him.

"No, it's awesome," Lan Jingyi mutters, still amazed. "Um... sect leader Nie? I... I never told you this, but... I'm sorry."

Nie Huaisang tilts his head slightly. "About what?"

Lan Jingyi takes a deep breath. "The whole thing with your older brother. The late Chifeng-zun. I mean... it was horrible enough how he... but then..."

Nie Huaisang squeezes his hand gently. It's a cruelly intimate gesture, and Lan Jingyi's ears turn bright red in an instant.

"It's alright," Nie Huaisang replies. "I won't lie, I was absolutely devastated at first, and... To think that the person I treasured so much was the culprit... the murderer... Don't worry, young master Lan. I will never stop missing my brother, but... I won't break."

Truth to be told, he never really *treasured* Jin Guangyao at all: even back when he didn't suspect the sleazy bastard, Jin Guangyao was merely the person who provided him with all sorts of expensive trinkets and occasionally distracted Nie Mingjue from yelling at him. Of course, Nie Huaisang likes to *say* that Jin Guangyao was practically the light of his life when other cultivators shower him with questions, because that fuels everyone's hatred for him. Nie Huaisang may be an incompetent fool, but at least he is not a remorseless criminal; surely someone who betrayed a foolish man's trust must be even worse.

The part about Nie Mingjue, however, is perhaps the truest thing he has said in a long, long while.

He catches a glimpse of genuine sadness in Lan Jingyi's dark brown eyes. He is such a breathtakingly handsome boy, overflowing with awkward gentleness and chivalrous pluck, and for a moment, Nie Huaisang wonders what he even sees in a callous, cynical old schemer like himself – a cynical old schemer whose carefully constructed public image is that of a

bumbling moron. It would be one thing if Lan Jingyi fell for the dashing, cheerful, charismatic Wei Wuxian, or the frighteningly standoffish Jiang Wanyin, but Nie Huaisang, of all people? He's not completely unattractive, and his soldiers fawn over him because evidently he's the first Nie leader in history who doesn't wear a permanently angry expression and plays on their protective instincts instead, but shouldn't Lan Jingyi's preferences be a bit more... traditional?

He doesn't feel *too* bad for goading the kid, because they haven't done anything irreparably dangerous yet, and frankly, he deserves to be entertained after ten years of ceaseless, tiring plotting, but some limits should be set, and Nie Huaisang releases Lan Jingyi's hand, only for the boy to grab *his* wrist this time.

"T-there's something else, sect leader Nie."

Oh *no*, he's clearly going to confess.

"I... Please don't hate me for this, but I think... I like you. I like you as a *man*."

He turns away in a very childlike manner, overwhelmed by his own scandalous recklessness. This is simultaneously the most hilarious – *as a man!* – and touching confession Nie Huaisang has ever received.

"I figured it out after... you know, the temple incident," Lan Jingyi explains in a trembling voice. "It took me a while, but then it sort of hit me and I *understood*. You were just... and I couldn't... and now..."

Nie Huaisang picks up his fan with his free hand and opens it to cover the lower part of his face. The poor boy looks like a mouse impaled on a thorn by a shriek, bleeding from his brave, honest young heart.

"How *could* I hate you for this?" Nie Huaisang whispers. "On the contrary, I'm humbled by your courage. But why me? I'm so dull..."

"No!" Lan Jingyi interrupts him hastily. "You're *beautiful*, you're... *cute*, and you have this huge garden, and you talk to birds like they're *people*, and you paint your own fans, and your clothes are so elegant, and you always have this dreamy face, and... Do I need a reason, sect leader Nie? I like you because I like you. That's all there is to it."

Nie Huaisang folds his fan. "I'm just shocked, I guess," he apologizes. "I'm not *used* to being called beautiful. Not by charming men such as yourself. For one, I'm so short, and also, well... kind of fat."

Lan Jingyi blushes profusely. "I don't *care* about that! Jin Rulan is thin like a stick, and I'd never fall for someone like him. You're great the way you are."

Nie Huaisang tries his best to appear confused and not overly triumphant. This precious little mouse will get over him someday, because he is sixteen, and youthful infatuations don't last forever – at worst, he'll spend the remaining months of summer and several warm autumn

nights fantasizing shyly about Nie Huaisang's full hips, as boys do – but right now, he is positively *glowing* with adorable embarrassment and excitement.

"But you'll have to forgive me, young master Lan," Nie Huaisang says softly. "I respect the... feelings you hold for me, however..."

"I get it," Lan Jingyi responds with unexpected composure, and Nie Huaisang notes that maybe there's more to this lovestruck child than meets the eye. "I mean, you barely know me outside of sect gatherings and such. I'm pretty much a nobody to you, and you can't possibly love me back."

Well. If nothing else, Lan Jingyi is remarkably wise for his tender age.

"I'd never call you a *nobody*," Nie Huaisang protests. "But I'm, uh – older than you."

Lan Jingyi smooths his unruly locks with his hand. "So? I'll grow up. Say, sect leader Nie, how about this? I'll come back to you in four – no, five years and meet you again as... a full-fledged member of the Lan clan." He stares thoughtfully at his boots. "As an adult man you can take seriously. And then..."

My dear child, you'll forget me as soon as autumn rolls by, but sure, why not.

Lan Jingyi rubs his wet forehead with his sleeve. "Sorry for taking so much of your time," he adds. "Anyway, I'm glad you're not sick anymore."

He inches closer, and his lips brush against Nie Huaisang's plump cheek. The older man's eyes widen in surprise: finally, the troublemaker of the Lan clan's new generation is showing his true colors. It's a blatant breach of etiquette, but Nie Huaisang doesn't believe in rules any more than Wei Wuxian does.

"Now you're toying with me," Nie Huaisang pouts coyly. "Just because I'm not the smartest guy out there..."

"You aren't that dumb, actually," Lan Jingyi objects suddenly.

Nie Huaisang pauses. How interesting. Is his perfect mask slipping after so many years of meticulous work? Once he gets the Chief Cultivator's seat, he *will* have to discard it, but for now...

"Hmm?"

Lan Jingyi shrugs. "I can tell by your eyes, and, um... I've been looking at your fan. You painted this starling yourself, right? It looks so real. And the flowers, too. You've *got* to be smart in order to..." He slaps himself on the forehead. "Argh! Sorry! Our teacher Lan Qiren always tells us we shouldn't judge our elders."

"Shush, I'm not an *elder*," Nie Huaisang scoffs happily.

The whole situation is vastly more amusing than it should be.

They bid their farewells – formally and properly, because Nie Huaisang's bodyguards are looming behind the gate – and Lan Jingyi leaves.

"Is this boy safe for you to associate with, master Nie?" Nie Junxiang demands as soon as Lan Jingyi's slender silhouette disappears in the distance. "You *told* us we had to be careful with the Lan clan."

"Is there anyone you *shouldn't* be careful with?" Nie Huaisang giggles. "Calm down, he's a sweetheart, though he might certainly grow into an... exceptional man someday."

Five years, he said, huh?

Five years.

Interlude: A Nest of Mice

Chapter Notes

Another random note: I'm sure you've figured it out by now, but this story is NOT supposed to be an accurate depiction of Actual Ancient Chinese Boys and Authentic Ancient Chinese Behavior, Speech, or Etiquette. As one of my wonderful readers has so succinctly put it, I'm just going feral with my headcanons. It's almost like a [Twitter](#) headcanon thread, only, you know, slightly more detailed than an average headcanon thread. If you want me to write something more ~~pretentious~~ realistic, please contact me in ten years I guess.

"I confessed to sect leader Nie," Lan Jingyi announces in a rather nonchalant manner.

"Congratulations," Lan Sizhui exclaims, and Jin Rulan almost spits his tea out.

"Wait, what?" he cries. "*What?* Lan Jingyi, this is officially your *dumbest* joke."

Lan Jingyi takes an uncharacteristically elegant sip from his cup and puts it down very carefully. "Well, I'm not joking," he says. "I told him I loved him and even gave him a kiss. Of *course*, it might seem unbelievable to someone who's *only* ever kissed his uncle..."

"We mustn't be haughty," Lan Sizhui warns him kindly. "Did you do it during your visit? I hope you didn't bother sect leader Nie too much."

Lan Jingyi waves his hand. "It's alright! He's getting better already. And by the way, I kissed him on the cheek, but we agreed to do more... *adult* things later."

"You're just making stuff up," Jin Rulan mutters, and his lower lip quivers as if he is about to burst into tears. "You're making stuff up to mess with me, Lan Jingyi! Since *when* have you been in love with Nie Huaisang? And stop talking about my uncle! You don't know *anything* about me or people I've kissed!"

He tosses a piece of silver on the table and storms out of the small teahouse, slamming the door behind him; the elderly owner simply blinks in quiet, tactful astonishment.

Lan Sizhui shakes his head sadly. "You shouldn't tease him like this," he scolds his fellow disciple. "I... get that sect leader Nie means a lot to you, but..."

Lan Jingyi rubs the bridge of his nose. "You aren't surprised?"

Lan Sizhui shrugs. "Not really, no? I mean... back at the Guanyin temple, you literally darted to sect leader Nie the moment you saw him. And hugged him. That certainly made me

wonder." He pauses. "And sure, I thought you were into women, but I guess... Anyway, please do me a favor and patch things up with Jin Ling."

"Oh, come on, it's not my fault!" Lan Jingyi groans. "Okay, I'll try."

He finds Jin Rulan right behind the teahouse, sullen and gloomy like a winter afternoon; his sour expression contrasts comically with the vivid whiteness of the blooming mock-orange. His dog Xianzi is by his side, but it seems that she doesn't blame Lan Jingyi for her master's bad mood, because she starts wagging her tail energetically as soon as Lan Jingyi shows up and winks at her.

"Stop it, Xianzi," Jin Rulan grumbles. "This guy's an idiot, and we don't talk to idiots."

Lan Jingyi lets out an exasperated sigh. "Yeah, Xianzi, clearly your master is better off alone... Seriously, what's gotten into you, young lady? You hate me because I'm a 'cut sleeve' now?"

Jin Rulan gives him a dark, heavy stare. "I don't *care* about that! I don't care if you prefer men or women or pigs or giant serpents. It's just that..." He glances at Xianzi. "People always lose their minds when they fall in love."

Lan Jingyi snickers. "Huh? Do I look crazy to you?"

"What *do* you think?" Jin Rulan snorts. "You told your teachers that you wanted to give sect leader Nie their regards and pay him a proper visit like a good Lan disciple, and then you went to his residence and k-k-kissed..." He blushes furiously and covers his mouth with his hand while Xianzi whimpers in confusion. "Why didn't he throw you out and tell Zewu-jun, anyway? You deserved to be whipped and locked up for a month."

Lan Jingyi scratches his head. "I dunno! But I suppose he didn't hate it."

"He's too timid! Can't even deal with a stupid kid! And he calls himself a sect leader!" Jin Rulan huffs. "Listen, can you... promise me one thing? If – *if!* – if by any chance Nie Huaisang decides that he l-l-likes you back, don't stop hanging out with us. I'll be *fine* without you around, but Lan Sizhui is practically a brother to you! No, more than a brother! Don't abandon him for some weird old man's sake! Nie Huaisang may be pretty, but your clan comes first! And I won't tell anyone else about your silly little *romance* if you try to behave."

Lan Jingyi rolls his eyes and squeezes Jin Rulan's slender shoulder. "Hey, it's not like I'm *courting* sect leader Nie or anything. Want to know the whole truth? He told me he was too old for me to begin with, and we sort of... decided to meet again in five years," he explains. "Well, I was the one who suggested it, and... he didn't disagree."

Jin Rulan pushes his hand away, but there is no anger in his gesture. "He was trying to let you save face! He might be smarter than he seems after all... Let's go back. Lan Sizhui is probably waiting for us, and I want to finish my dumplings."

They walk into the teahouse again, much to Lan Sizhui's approval; the owner chuckles silently as Jin Rulan declares that he has finally brought Lan Jingyi to his senses and orders

an enormous plate of expensive sweets – only for himself and Lan Sizhui, he quickly specifies, though Lan Sizhui manages to pass a couple of tiny cakes to Lan Jingyi under the table.

He still looks indignant, but Lan Jingyi notices an indistinct glint of relief flickering in his eyes, and smiles.

The Mouse and the Shrike: Five Years Later

Chapter Notes

Quick note: I know that *Your Excellency* is not the most... er, *Mo Dao Zu Shi*-esque form of address, but there ARE in fact some Chinese terms that can be translated like this, more or less. ~~In other words, I thought it was funny so I used it.~~ Also, this chapter contains a reference to Nie Huaisang's relationship with Nie Mingjue, but despite the context, it's not supposed to be incestuous. I do think that Nie-cest is a fascinating ship with tons of dramatic potential, but in this particular story, they're just brothers, and this reference is mostly there to show his importance in Nie Huaisang's life.

Quite frankly, Nie Huaisang enjoys his job as the Chief Cultivator.

It's not remotely easy, and sometimes, he finds it hard to restrain himself from setting people on fire. When you are the Chief Cultivator, your work is never done, and nobody apart from your most loyal followers cares if you have a splitting headache or simply aren't in the mood: you must make speeches, and conduct ceremonies, and solve disputes, and organize night hunts or sealing rites. The entire cultivator community was in shambles when he seized power – or *rather*, when the remaining clan heads practically begged him to lead them, and he *reluctantly* agreed to try. It wasn't Jin Guangyao's fault, not really: Nie Huaisang has exactly zero regrets about his demise, but objectively speaking, he was a decent leader. Unfortunately, some old, deep-rooted problems take decades to solve, and honestly, it's a shame that Jin Guangyao ruined his illustrious career so soon by incurring the cold wrath of a sheepish, unassuming young man. Still, it's thrilling, like an intricate game of weiqi, and Nie Huaisang spends days and nights munching on pumpkin seeds while poring over old manuscripts, maps, reports, and letters from commoners.

Nie Huaisang taps his fan against his chin as he ponders. The sect gathering will begin in less than an hour; as usual, they are meeting at the Hall of Council – for neutrality's sake, and also because Nie Huaisang's residence is *his residence*, thank you very much. It's a relatively small, austere building: the clan heads were rather puzzled when he suggested this design, since they expected the elegant, fashionable, art-loving sect leader Nie to come up with something luxurious, but he explained, with a modest smile on his face, that administrative buildings did not need to be overly *pompous*, and everyone chuckled in agreement, probably thinking of the Jinlin Tower.

Behind the Hall of Council, there is a small untended garden – the Chief Cultivator's charming, eccentric weakness, a tiny piece of artificial wilderness where birds thrive among the overgrown shrubs. Nie Huaisang stops to gaze at the olive-green fire-capped tit, when suddenly a familiar voice distracts him.

"Your Excellency."

Nie Huaisang turns around to see a well-built, gallant-looking man dressed in white and blue, with a narrow ribbon adorning his forehead and shiny black hair swept back in a ponytail. "Sect leader Lan," Nie Huaisang greets him and bows. "You're joining us at last."

The man groans in disappointment. "News travels fast, huh? And I wanted to surprise you."

"I'm sorry," Nie Huaisang replies amiably. "But this is not exactly something you can hide, you know? Zewu-jun informed me immediately when he decided to step down as the leader of the Lan clan, Hanguang-jun is with the Yiling Patriarch, and the rest..."

"Yeah," Lan Jingyi concedes. "I suppose you're right."

"You've matured so nicely," Nie Huaisang continues admiringly. "It's unbelievable! You're almost as tall as my older brother..."

"About that," Lan Jingyi interrupts him, and his expression turns serious. "Do you remember our promise? I told you I would come to see you as a full-fledged member of the Lan clan, and confess to you again. I hope that a sect leader is good enough for the great Chief Cultivator," he adds with a wry grin. "I'm in love with you, Your Excellency Nie Huaisang. It's fine if you don't feel the same about me just yet, but at the very least... let me try."

Nie Huaisang blinks, then opens his fan and covers his mouth. "Well, *now* I'm surprised," he says. This is most certainly not a lie. "I fully expected you to get over me in a month or two. Tell me, sect leader Lan, what *do* you like about me in the first place? You may not know it, but... I'm unpleasant. I'm a profoundly nasty, unscrupulous, vicious old man with a pebble for a heart. The sweet little sect leader Nie you used to..."

"I *know* that, actually," Lan Jingyi protests. "Sure, I was shocked when you went and... became the Chief Cultivator like that. I think many people were. And yes, I realized that... the Nie Huaisang I adored had another side to him. But look, Your Excellency, I'm not a child anymore. I *get* that... someone who presides over the clans can't be perfectly nice all the time. Still!" he asserts. "You just *want* to seem horrible, don't you? Everyone is talking about how you've been cracking down on bribery and corruption as of late, it's pretty amazing."

Nie Huaisang sighs. Lan Jingyi is not strictly *wrong* about his recent anti-corruption politics, but as usual, everything is more complex than it sounds. "Ah. Classic Lan obstinacy, I see."

Lan Jingyi's hand lands softly on his shoulder. "Please, Your Excellency."

Nie Huaisang pauses, then moves closer to Lan Jingyi and rests his head on the younger man's broad chest. "*Must* you be so difficult, sect leader Lan?" he complains wearily. "I'm very, very weak against handsome men. So weak, in fact, that I remain unmarried at the ripe age of forty... er, thirty-seven. How *can* I say no to someone who has persevered for five whole years?"

"Then don't," Lan Jingyi whispers and leans down to nip at the lobe of Nie Huaisang's ear, sending shivers of euphoria down the older man's spine. Nie Huaisang has experienced this

before, with more guys than he can count, because he is a hedonist before he is a politician, but there is something uniquely fascinating and exciting about this stubborn, impudent boy's naïve yet sensual boldness.

"Insolent kid," Nie Huaisang hisses, but Lan Jingyi simply laughs and lifts him in his arms with terrifying ease. It feels nothing like Nie Mingjue's embrace, but maybe he doesn't need to measure everyone against Nie Mingjue's image to begin with. Nie Huaisang frowns, clinging to Lan Jingyi's clothes. By any chance, has this sassy mouse grown too big and strong for the careless, arrogant shrike? "What if someone sees us? This... is a public place."

"So? You'll come up with something, Your Excellency!" Lan Jingyi beams. "I dunno, aren't you prone to fainting spells and things like that?"

"Put me down *this instant*, sect leader Lan," Nie Huaisang demands, and Lan Jingyi obeys, but there is a very visible mischievous sparkle in his eyes. "We need to finish our gathering first – *incidentally*, this is going to be your very first official meeting as a clan head, so *please* try your absolute best to pay attention – and then, *perhaps*, we will continue this conversation in a more... private setting."

"You're blushing," Lan Jingyi notes and pinches his round cheek gently. "Hey, can I... kiss you?"

"Go ahead," Nie Huaisang surrenders dejectedly, and sure enough, Lan Jingyi assaults his mouth this time.

With the fervency of someone who has persevered for five whole years.

When their lips finally part, Nie Huaisang almost suffers a real fainting spell.

"Sorry, Your Excellency," Lan Jingyi stutters, clearly bewildered by his own fit of amorous enthusiasm. "I... I think I ruined your hairdo. A-and your lips look a bit swollen now. Um, I-I'm sure nobody will notice! Forgive me! You're just so pretty, and I..."

"I don't dislike men who are a little rough," Nie Huaisang murmurs, no longer able to pretend that he is angry or displeased. "Really! And I thought the Lan sect valued restraint above everything. Say, was that... your very first *proper* kiss?"

"Well," Lan Jingyi coughs. "It... was."

Nie Huaisang pats his face reassuringly. "I appreciate it. Don't worry, sect leader Lan, I'll... come up with something. But next time, do me a favor and..."

"Got it," Lan Jingyi nods and catches his hand to kiss his fingertips. "I'll be more careful. On sect gathering days, that is."

Nie Huaisang snorts and pokes him playfully into his ribs. "You'll be too busy to fool around with me, my dear. Trust me, if you want to win everyone's respect, especially with Zewu-jun as your predecessor, and get things done..."

Right now, he wants this passionate, ridiculous youngster to pin him to his bed, to strip him bare and ravage his body, leaving marks on his neck and chest; sadly, their duties cannot wait, but Nie Huaisang has the patience of a rock. He adjusts his hairpins in an effortlessly graceful gesture. "Let's go, sect leader Lan. I'll introduce you formally."

His head feels wonderfully light.

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